

Rules of Engagement

Three years after the ARF introduced its working definition of the term “engagement,” there is still a lack of clarity over what the term describes and how it can best be measured. Perhaps the problem is that no one definition can really suffice when engagement takes place in multiple contexts. To be useful, the definition needs to account for all three contexts of engagement: brands, communications, and media.

M I L L W A R D B R O W N ' S P O V

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Much debate has centered on the topic of engagement in recent years. Interest in this concept developed as it became clear that the new digital world presented both new possibilities and new hazards for marketers. While digital media channels allowed people to experience a new degree of interaction with brand communication, marketers soon realized that they needed to gain “permission” to market to people through these channels. Simply bashing down people’s doors by intruding into their online surfing or mobile communication would be counterproductive. People needed to be won over. Thus the focus on “engagement.”

In 2006, after devoting a substantial amount of time to consideration and debate, the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) presented a working definition of “engagement” at its annual conference in New York City. However, the long-awaited definition, “turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by a surrounding context,” raised as many questions as it answered, including: Is engagement a switch to turn something on? Does the term “prospect” refer only to non-users or does it include current users? And what, really, is the role of media? Is it to enhance an idea, or to deliver an idea, or both?

Three years later, these questions remain unanswered. Along the way, the engagement debate has been hijacked by various digital media specialists who, by defining engagement on their own terms, have narrowed the focus of the discussion to the ways in which people interact with specific media channels. This has been neither helpful nor productive for the communications business at large.

In the face of this continued confusion, it might be a good idea to go back to the basics. While the media environment has changed in recent decades, the fundamentals of brand success have not. If a brand is to succeed and thrive, people must want to buy it. They must have positive ideas, thoughts, and feelings about it. These positive associations will be built and maintained through exposure to controlled and uncontrolled brand communication as well as through direct experience with the brand. Media engagement is not the whole story, nor even the most important part of the engagement story. Marketers need to think about engagement not just in terms of media but also in relation to brands and communication. Therefore, in order to provide marketers with useful advice and metrics, we need to define engagement in relation to each of those contexts: brands, communications, and media.

Ultimately, successful marketing communication leads to brand engagement, specifically with the formation of a rich network



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of positive brand associations in consumers' minds. In order for marketing communication to create, strengthen, and refresh those associations, that communication needs to be engaging. Finally, though much of the engagement debate has taken place around the idea of media engagement, and media do play a key role in delivering a receptive audience to the communication, the primary role of media is actually to facilitate engagement with the communication. Thus media engagement might better be called "facilitation."

There are other ways to engage with communication besides clicking on a link or physically interacting with a medium; ultimately we are trying to engage consumers' brains, not their bodies.

Our Brains

Recent advances in our understanding of the brain help to inform the engagement discussion. The capabilities of our brains have evolved over centuries to help us survive. The same capabilities that helped our ancestors avoid predators, find food, and create shelter from the elements are at work in our brains today as we negotiate our modern world. We face very different challenges than our ancestors did, but we rely on the same response and retrieval mechanisms in our brains.

In his Millward Brown Point of View from May 2007, titled "Engaging Consumers' Brains: The Latest Learning," Graham Page describes the findings from recent brain research and highlights their relevance to marketing. Crucial to understanding brand and communications engagement is the finding that each time we encounter an object, whether it's an animal, a table, or a brand, we assemble a "representation" of that object from all the associations stored in our brains. These representations are formed using associations from three basic categories: knowledge, experience, and emotion.

We conducted a large-scale analysis of different brands to look at the relative importance of these three types of associations. We wondered, for example, if brands that were stronger in their emotional associations would be stronger overall. The fascinating conclusion was that brands that had balanced representations across the three sets of associations were healthier and more likely to grow than were brands with unbalanced associations. With an understanding of the importance of establishing a balanced set of associations in consumers' brains, we can approach our discussion of the different types of engagement with that important end in mind.

Brand Engagement

Some commentators have suggested that we redefine engagement as willingness to spend time with a brand, and then use the amount of time



people spend as an engagement metric. However, this idea is deeply flawed. People can be devoted users of particular brands but still lack the desire to spend time interacting with either the brand or the product category. For example, my household has been a devoted user of PG Tips tea for as long as I can remember. But nobody in my house has the slightest desire to visit a PG Tips website, read a PG Tips magazine, or spend time with the brand in any way whatsoever, other than to drink it. This is not a



negative reflection on PG Tips. It is merely a reflection of the status of the tea category in our household's priorities.

If willingness to spend time with a brand were an appropriate definition of engagement, it would tend to lead us toward particular channels and away from others. But willingness to spend time with a brand is highly category-specific. The definition of brand engagement should not focus around time spent with a brand but rather on brand associations. A brand that has successfully engaged consumers has planted and sustained fresh, powerful brand associations in their minds. Those associations generate interest, curiosity and expectations about the product or service.

All media channels can engage their audiences; therefore, whether TV advertising is more engaging than radio advertising is an entirely sterile debate.

For the notion of brand engagement to be meaningful for businesses, it must relate to the purchasing decisions that consumers make and the circumstances under which they make them — specifically, the fact that consumers choose brands in the context of a variety of offerings in a given category. While the strength of positive brand associations will not always flow through to purchasing (because of external factors such as availability), in general the relationship between brand engagement and purchase intent is both strong and measurable.

One measure that takes both brand associations and category context into account is the Bonding level of the BrandDynamics™ pyramid. In calculating Bonding, two factors come into play: the relationship between various brand associations and purchase intent, and the salience of the most important associations (in terms of loyalty in the category) for each brand. By drawing on the second factor, Bonding takes account of the fact that a consumer may engage with more than one brand in a category while choosing to purchase only one.

Communications Engagement

One of the most famous scientific experiments on attention was described in a classic scientific paper called “Gorillas in Our Midst.”¹ While viewing a film in which students passed a ball to one another, people were tasked with counting the number of times the ball changed hands. The vast majority of observers failed to notice when somebody in a gorilla suit meandered in among the people passing the ball, despite the fact that the gorilla appeared right in the center of the action. The experiment demonstrated two things: that we focus our attention on things that matter to us, and that we are incredibly good at ignoring things.

Both of those observations are directly relevant to communications. As we process the world around us, we engage with those things that have personal relevance to us and ignore the rest. This presents a major challenge for advertising because most of the time, when people see advertising, they are not thinking about brands. Typically the brand purchasing decision is made at a different time. Therefore it is the communications idea that has to resonate with people, either by virtue of its emotional charge or its distinctiveness.

So communications engagement should be defined as the act of giving attention — that is, devoting mental resources — to a piece of communication. Engagement with communications is crucial because memory is a consequence of engagement. Communication will have no positive effect on a brand if it doesn't hold people's attention long enough to establish or reinforce brand associations.

And that brings us to another key point. Advertising can be “engaging” — i.e., highly enjoyable and entertaining — but will not serve the advertised brand if that brand is not part of what is engaging about the ad. If the positive ad associations are not stored in the memory in connection with the brand, then even though communications engagement is achieved, it does not serve its purpose.

¹ Daniel J Simons, Christopher F Chabris, “Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattention blindness for dynamic events,” *Perception*, vol. 28 (1999), 1059 -1074.



Furthermore, communications engagement isn't an end in itself. It is about potential, not necessarily effect. After people have been exposed to communication and their brand associations have been refreshed or expanded, is the brand more appealing? Will the brand experience be enhanced? These are the things that will determine the motivational power of the communication.

Media Engagement

As we discussed earlier, much of the debate about engagement has taken place in the context of media. But media channels cannot be thought about in isolation from the creative work in those channels. All media channels can engage their audiences; those that couldn't would have ceased to exist by now. Therefore, whether TV advertising is more engaging than radio advertising is an entirely sterile debate. The more pertinent question is: Which form of communication will be better at delivering an audience that will be receptive to engaging with a particular message? The role of channels is one that is specific to the advertising task.

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Therefore, the critical thing is to choose those channels that will facilitate engagement with your communication. A radio ad at drive time might be the perfect way to deliver one message to an audience. For a different message, a competition on a microsite might be a more powerful way of reaching them. The channel choice should be led by the brand communication idea.

The idea that digital channels allow viewers to interact with the communication should not be a deciding factor unless interactivity is essential to the campaign. There are other ways to engage with communication besides clicking on a link or physically interacting with a medium; ultimately we are trying to engage consumers' brains, not their bodies. And marketers should remember that only a tiny minority of those exposed to communication in any channel will choose to interact with it. Therefore, to maximize the value of a channel investment, we need to ensure that even those who do not interact with the brand or message are still left with a positive impression of the brand.

Conclusion

If engagement is to be a useful yardstick to measure the effectiveness of our communications, we need to clarify what it means in three contexts: brands, communications, and media. Brand engagement is the degree to which consumers have a rich network of positive brand associations in their heads. Communications engagement is the degree to which a piece of communication is able to command attention. And what we call “media engagement” — though it might better be termed “media facilitation” — is the degree to which a channel can deliver communication to a receptive audience.

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